

# 1905: The Russian Revolution



A short history of the first unsuccessful Russian Revolution of 1905. Following the 'Bloody Sunday' massacre, a general strike paralysed the country and workers' and peasants' councils were set up.

The revolt started on January 22 when a peaceful, mildly reformist, protest march in St. Petersburg was shoot at by troops with more than 1,000 killed or injured. This day became known as "Bloody Sunday." Rather than squelch the protests, the repression fanned the flames of rebellion.

All across Russia, different sections of the people moved into active protest. The peasants and workers joined with the middle classes, intelligentsia and (minority) national groups (i.e. Georgians, Ukrainians etc) against the absolutism and oppression of the Tsarist monarchy. Each group had different aims, however, and the two forces which played the leading part in the revolution were the workers and peasants, who raised economic and political demands while the better-off middle-classes sought mostly the latter.

Unrest was spread as the year progressed, reaching peaks in early summer and autumn before climaxing in October. There were naval mutinies at Sevastopol, Vladivostok and Kronstadt, peaking in June, with the mutiny aboard the Battleship Potemkin, in which Afanasy Matushenko played a key role. Strikes took place all over the country and the universities closed down when the whole student body complained about the lack of civil liberties by staging a walkout. Lawyers, doctors, engineers, and other middle-class workers established the Union of Unions and demanded a constituent assembly.

In the countryside, there were land-seizures by the peasantry (including the looting the larger estates) and a nation-wide Peasant Union was created. In the towns, the workers' act of resistance was the strike. There was a general strike in St. Petersburg immediately after Bloody Sunday. Over 400,000 workers were involved by the end of January. The strikes



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spread across the country. In the process new forms of working class self-organisation were created. These were councils made up of workers delegates, the famous "soviets."

While the soviets were created by workers to solve their immediate problems (for example winning the strike, the eight-hour day, working conditions) their role changed. They quickly evolved into an organ of the general and political representation of workers, raising political demands. Needless to say, their potential as a base for political agitation were immediately recognised by revolutionaries, and although they were not involved in the early stages both the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks attempted to gain influence in them. However, as anarchist Peter Kropotkin put it, the general strike was the key development as

*"the working men again threw the weight of their will into the contest and gave quite a new turn to the movement. A strike of bakers broke out at Moscow in October, and they were joined in their strike by the printers. This was not the work of any revolutionary organisation.*

*It was entirely a working men's affair, but suddenly what was meant to be a*

*simple manifestation of economical discontent grew up, invaded all trades, spread to St. Petersburg, then all over Russia, and took the character of such an imposing revolutionary manifestation that autocracy had to capitulate before it."*

The first soviet (which is Russian for council) was established in Ivanovna-Voznesensk during the 1905 Textile Strike. It began as a strike committee but developed into an elected body of the town's workers. Over the next few months Soviets of Workers Deputies were established in around 60 different towns. On October 13th, the more famous St. Petersburg Soviet of Workers' Deputies was created out of the 'Great October Strike' on the initiative of the printers' strike committee in order to better co-ordinate the strike.

This was Russia's first political general strike, lasting from September to October 30th.

Although strikes had been common in Russia in the years leading up to 1905, this powerful weapon of direct action effectively paralysed the whole country. The October strike started in St. Petersburg and quickly spread to Moscow and soon the railwaymen strike paralysed the whole Russian railway network. "A new weapon, more terrible than street warfare, had thus been tested and proved to work admirably," observed Kropotkin.

The soviets had challenged the power of Nicholas II and the general strike forced him to issue the October Manifesto, with its parliament, freedom of the press, assembly and association.

They failed to remove him from power and he quickly reneged on his promises. By

December, communist Leon Trotsky and the rest of the executive committee of the St.

Petersburg Soviet were arrested (a Bolshevik putsch in Moscow that month failed as it was disorganised and uncoordinated). The revolt was over. Tsarism was to remain in power until February 1917 when a similar wave of mass protests finally drove him from power.